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THE ENGLISH TEACHER AND THE PHILISTINES

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The Philistines of old seem to have been a sort of pestiferous tribe, dwelling in rather barren land, filling their minds with sordid notions of material enterprise and with a special grudge against the Israelites. They were a perennial nuisance. Almost any chapter of the historical books of the Bible records some malicious invasion, or some overbearing attempt to impose their ideas of civilization on the timid, spiritually minded Israelites. This chosen people had a hard time of it to get rid of them, to teach them their places. That little episode of David and Goliath seems to have been about the only encounter that very seriously impressed upon them the fact that sometimes mind is superior to matter.

In fact, the Israelites never quite put them out of business. Some of their enterprising offspring started families in various other regions. As time went on, we are led to believe that, for example, some of their descendants piled into Rome from the North, causing Julius Caesar to bid England a hurried farewell. Later, in England itself Matthew Arnold, you will recall, discovered quite a collection of them, and was prone to use rather strong language whenever he spoke his mind about their activities. And Bernard Shaw today keeps talking about them with considerable exasperation.

As for us, we have them right here in America now, vast hordes of them. We have the problem of educating their children. They emigrated first from England—or, shall we say, from Germany—and settled in Missouri. From Missouri they spread all over America until now we cannot turn a corner without running into one.

Well, who are the Philistines today, and what do they want? In the first place, let us say, to their credit, we really couldn't get along without them. They represent the bulk of our population, the hard-headed wage-earners who have righteous ambitions to give

their children a useful education, and who, very properly, speak their minds freely as to just what they want and don't want. They pay the taxes from hard-earned wages. They haven't a great outlook on life, but some of them want their children to have; others don't care—many can't see that the schools want them to have. We should call this class the modern Philistines, and they represent a serious factor in public education. They talk learnedly about the merits of the "three R's"; they denounce the "fads" in school curricula; they measure the teacher's efficiency in terms of the number of hours he puts in at the schoolroom, as compared to the time the clerk or the bricklayer spends; they have to be "shown" very definitely the exact and concrete evidence of any educational process in terms of money, jobs, ability to "get on in the world," or bland "smartness." They berate the schools because their Sam or Susie doesn't get the grades of their neighbor's Sam or Susie, when their Sam or Susie is a pure, unadulterated "bonehead," and there is no help for him. The drygoods merchant who judges the schools by the inferior product they must send him from the ranks of those pupils in whose homes economic pressure is strong, and who protests because some anemic maiden cannot spell "mercerized," or "percale," or work fractions by some short-cut method he learned at the cross-roads, is a Philistine. The real-estate agent who is satisfied if the schools teach his son to approximate the commercial virtues of push, punch, and pep is a Philistine. The lady whose enterprising husband managed to clean up a million in the pit and thus enabled them to take their places among the *nouveau riche*, who talks peevishly about those wretched public schools because they didn't give her Mary an intellectual tone to her conversation and fine manners among those members of smart society she wants to cultivate, is a Philistine. The newspaper editor who relegates to obscure corners the meritorious doings of the schools and displays in large type the foolish escapades of individual pupils, or who continually harps on the theory, "Our home teachers for our own schools," is a Philistine. The physician or lawyer who sneers at the professional education of the teacher, and who offers continual and gratuitous advice on how the teacher should conduct himself, what he should teach, and how he should teach, but who

instantly resents any criticism of his own professional conduct, is a Philistine. The member of the school board who closes his mind to any project offered by his school superintendent, whom he helps pay to make a special study of school needs, merely because it costs money, who continually nags the teachers because they don't confine their teaching to the "three R's," but who in the same breath blames the schools because they don't keep the children out of the movies, teach them manners and obedience to parents, and fill their minds with a multiplicity of ideas so that they will want to stay at home, is a Philistine.

Well, that is a sufficient catalogue. Who are the Israelites—the timid, spiritually minded folk who have a vision, who believe that man does not live by bread alone; that education is a matter of individual growth, not material achievement; that life is worth living for the sake of the process as well as the end; and that the things that make for moral character, the love of good books, choice companionships, sweet refinements, tact, love of the beautiful, sturdy judgments, and idealism are more truly useful than dollars, and "things," and material success? Well, you have guessed it. We are—the English teachers. But, of course, we don't often mention this aloud.

What do the Philistines want of the Israelites? If you should ask frankly any Philistine what he wanted the schools to produce in its pupils, he would say, "Teach them efficiency and personality, and I will be satisfied." The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that the teaching of English particularly can bring about these two conditions in an eminently practical way and yet preserve the traditional functions of the subject, if only the Philistine will have a little patience, a little tolerance, and long-sightedness.

The way to get at this problem is to try to grasp those peculiar qualities which make up what we call the American mind, or the American temperament. It is true that today the business man is "it." The present seems to be his innings. The intellectual set of all kinds is in the field. We are a small portion of the team. We must admit that in the game of life the team at the bat is piling up runs. It is our business to make them earn every run, and, if possible, to keep the runs down. Several helpful books

might be recommended. Probably you have read them. They are: *The American Mind*, by Bliss Perry; *American Ideals*, by Hamilton Wright Mabie, and *Humanly Speaking*, by Samuel Crothers—particularly in this last the chapters on “The American Temperament” and “The Spoiled Children of Civilization.” By a curious and interesting coincidence the gist of these discussions is the same. It is well stated in an article by Winston Churchill in the January, 1916, number of *Harper's*, “A Plea for the American Tradition,” who likewise contributes his judgment to the others: “Our American theory of Democracy is no short cut to the millennium, and if democracy is to have any approach to perfection, that comparative perfection must be one of growth, not of achievement”—that is, a process of mental and spiritual growth, not a record of acts, performances, stunts. Or, again, it is a “tradition laying emphasis on individual initiative and individual freedom.” Read, if you have not read, William Hawley Smith's book, *All the Children of All the People*, and see whether we are not exerting our energies in a frantic effort to educate all the children of all the people in the same way, whereas (if it is not heresy to say it) only some of the children of some of the people need it. Read what Professor Broadus, in the November, 1915, issue of *The English Journal*, in writing on “The Case of John Smith”—the very type we are talking about—has to say.

This sounds like rampant Bourbonism, but is not the point of view worth taking? We are spending a great deal of money today in all sorts of educational stunts—that is all they are—we are racking our brains trying to make composition easy and literature alluring to the sons of the Philistines, who are blind, deaf, and obdurate; we are straining at gnats and swallowing camels; sugar-coating our educational pills, and spending too much time pottering about among odds and ends of instruction, practically wrapping knowledge up in bundles and delivering it to the homes of pupils who are too lazy to come to school on time for it or too thick-headed to understand or appreciate what is given them. The Philistine defines culture as “being onto your job.” Matthew Arnold defines it as “knowing yourself and the world.” Both are right. We may feel irritation that the Philistines are continually

trying to invade our land. On the contrary, considering their vast numbers (and their grip on the exchequer), we owe them serious obligation. They want us to teach their boys and girls efficiency and to give them personality. By efficiency they probably mean the ability to do things; and by personality, the merit of being somebody. That is to say, the merchant wants his youthful clerks to sell more goods; the machinist wants his employees to work accurately and rapidly; the lawyer wants his stenographer to spell correctly and to paragraph his letters for him, and so on. By personality they mean, presumably, the ability to make a good impression on customers, callers, and folk generally. Well and good. We can produce that sort of efficiency, only we believe those two words mean more. Efficiency means not only knack and alertness; it means mental adaptability, insight, taste, wisdom, imagination. Personality means charm, pleasing manners and voice, a mind enriched by intelligent study of the arts and the humanities, and that indefinable merit of making and keeping real friends, and, above all, the consciousness of having rendered spiritual service. The only quarrel we have with the Philistines is that they won't see that these things, too, are eminently practical. They are satisfied if we attain only unto the things they enumerate.

At a dinner recently given by the Schoolmasters' Club to some representative business and professional men of this city for the purpose of a frank discussion of the educational needs of the city, a department-store man complained because the girls sent him could not spell all the technical words in his business as soon as they entered the store. He frankly said that if the schools would teach that sort of spelling, the ability to do sums quickly and to sell goods, he would be satisfied. A lawyer made the complaint that his stenographer could not spell legal terms first hand and could not paragraph his legal papers correctly and rapidly. He said the boys who come to him were capable of doing only 70 per cent perfect work, whereas he must have 100 per cent. The position of both these gentlemen implied that, for them, public education is the exploitation of youth for the realization of larger personal profit. What other mental equipment the schools may give the

child, what other enlargement of their mental horizon, is nothing to them. Can the business world ever get 100 per cent efficiency from the schools? Never, so long as the efficiency of the schoolroom is one thing and that of the factory or of the office another—as it should be. Never, so long as the present scheme of promotion obtains. We can guarantee them 100 per cent efficiency of 70 per cent of the work for the average pupil, but no more. To try for 100 per cent efficiency in the schoolroom would mean a retention in the elementary grades of vast hordes of pupils who would be deprived of a chance of mental growth, as well as a continuous stream of demotions, to the same end. It would mean a snarl of administrative machinery which no superintendent or principal would tolerate. Does the business world demand 100 per cent efficiency of itself? Not when Dun's Agency reports that annually 75 per cent of the business firms fail.

Let us consider for a moment a few practical phases of the English content to see what we are doing and can do to compromise with the Philistines.

Take this matter of spelling. The business and professional man demands accurate spelling of the terminology of his work. Does he realize that the spelling vocabularies today include, not only the words of our fathers, but the hundreds of new general words added by a natural course of events, and in addition the technical words of law, dry goods, hardware, groceries, mechanics, electricity, etc.? The same men who complain about the poor arithmetic also forget that that elementary subject has expanded almost beyond recognition by the process of our widening commercial and industrial life, inventions, and discoveries. It is a big task to meet these exactions. Have pupils today any greater power of mind than their fathers? We think not. But we *are* tackling this spelling problem—all of us. We are striving to cope with the task, and, despite the hue and cry, we are producing better spellers than our fathers.

In the second place, to answer the lawyer's complaint about the poor paragraphing of his stenographer, I wonder if he knows of any mechanical device by which composition can really be taught so that teachers can be positively dead sure that now they have

absolutely secured fluency, coherence, unity, correctness, and all the rest of the rhetorical virtues. I wonder if he is dead sure that he himself has mastered them. Our trouble, however, has been that we have tried to make writers of our pupils. A certain professor in the English department of a large university at a dinner recently said that he believed it was the function of the high school to make writers of its pupils before they came up to college; but there was not a secondary-school man present who agreed with him, and, in fact, few of the other college men. The function of written composition is not to make writers—the great majority will never write more than a few business and social letters after they leave school; the purpose of English composition is to align itself with the other academic subjects, primarily, of course, to give pupils the vehicle of expression, but more largely to open up books to them. A person enjoys music the more if he himself can play a little. Its purpose is also to open up to themselves their own natures, their possibilities and limitations, and the world about them. The effort at self-expression is itself the process of seeing deeper, more fully, more exactly. We are chasing after too many will-o'-the-wisps of style, when pupils never get the faintest glimmer of its meaning.

The third consideration is to teach literature as an expression of the spiritual man, not as a record of his material progress. Stress the ethical values. Teach the progress of events by types of expression rather than by biographies or periods. In considering Lowell, Dickens, Lamb, or George Eliot, we must teach the things their books tell us of what there is in life to enjoy and to reject, as evidences of the interests of man, not make their work an etymological and historical museum. The crimes of Macbeth are to be studied, not as a record of an event in the eleventh century in Scotland, but as a means of judging the motives of men today. Who are the Macbeths and the Lady Macbeths of today? Who the Becky Sharps, the Sir Roger de Coverleys? What would Burke say today on preparedness if he were in the Senate? How today can we seek the Holy Grail? What other kinds of Silas Marners are there? Likewise, give dramatics a place in the school course. Let us go back to a great deal of old-fashioned reading

aloud and memorizing. In fine, teach literature as a continuous, existent expression of the aspiration of man, not as a petrified inscription of events.

In the fourth place, establish for yourself the certain definite or minimum standards to which all pupils may attain—the John Smiths and all. The Johns Smiths will get only the minimum standard work; the rest will do more. I refer, for example, to such things as 500 picked words for each respective year, which all pupils must spell correctly by the end of the year—correctly, within the limitations of common sense and the teacher's energy—the habit of acquiring specifically new words for vocabulary purposes; certain minimum essentials in grammar and punctuation, memory work, outside reading, etc. Even the John Smiths can get 100 per cent of these minimum essentials, if they are made simple and brief enough; that is to say, all pupils can get 100 per cent of 70 per cent of the work. The rest will do 80 or 90 per cent. The point I make about the Philistines is that the great majority of the boys and girls they get are these 70 per centers, and they should be willing to take them at their worth, and to do their share in shaping them to their particular needs, and to quit belaboring the public schools. We all know that most of the 80 and 90 per centers go to college, and that, if they take up commercial or industrial work, it is because of sudden and dire necessity. And then, primarily, keep in mind certain principles of attainment from which to work and toward which to work.

In the last place, let the English teacher himself or herself be human. Learn the fine art of mixing. Write for the press every chance you get. Speak out in "meetin'." Show your pupils you can play tennis and baseball, as well as quote from Shelley. Resent at all times the judgment that because of your association with immature minds your opinions on topics in general are not worth while. Keep abreast of the times and seek opportunities for shaping and expressing opinions. There is too much acquiescence on our part that, since we are teachers, we must necessarily not know thus and so about questions of the day, or that we are necessarily academic and theoretical. Let us declare that we are not necessarily academic. Read the modern magazines, as well

as the classics. How can we interest Sam and Susan in *Macbeth* if we are in total ignorance of the achievements of Sherlock Holmes? How can we create dramatic taste if, to our pupils' knowledge, we have never seen the banalities of Charlie Chaplin? How can we teach composition successfully if we cannot ourselves write? How can we prove to our pupils that there are better ways of spending an evening than over the bridge table, if all we know is the game of flinch?

Finally, to come back to the Philistines, let us make their acquaintance a little more enthusiastically, so that we can get their point of view. And once we have it, let us strive to make clear to them that the schools are exerting all their professional skill and energy in a sincere desire to meet their wants and the demands of the age. Let us exhort them to be a little more tolerant of youth, to take upon their own shoulders the rightful burden of helping youth adapt itself to their peculiar demands—demands no school can incorporate in its well-defined task of inculcating general principles. Let us try to make them realize that a business and professional man, mellowed and seasoned to his peculiar work, has reached his maturity, possesses a grasp of his work and its processes and is naturally a bit impatient of groping youth. Will they not stoop a little and offer that encouragement to which youth quickly responds, but denied which he shrinks from any expression? Will they not turn once in a while from criticism of the public schools and ask parents if they are doing anything to share with the schools in the problems they have thrust on them—to supervise the moral and social activities of their boys and girls? They should realize for themselves that in this day business has assumed undue proportions and importance, that the dollar has taken precedence over the things of the spirit, and that the meretricious appeal of mere *things* is too loud and insistent. They should know that once the schools throw overboard their heritage as conservators of the mental growth of youth and yield to a “dollar diplomacy” aim in education, the bottom will drop out of the social weal.